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ABSTRACT

An effective communication learning experience is the nonverbal communication field trip in organizational settings. Objectives for this activity include defining and describing nonverbal areas such as "proxemics," "chronemics," "objectics," "kinesics," "haptics," and "vocalics," and to observe these areas in an organizational setting. The experience is also an opportunity for students to transfer new knowledge on nonverbal communication to individualized work and living environments. These objectives are accomplished in four stages: (1) a mini-lecture on the six nonverbal communication concepts prior to the field trip; (2) on-site observation for approximately an hour and a half at sites including campus buildings, shopping malls, and business offices; (3) group meetings to compare observations; and (4) extension of knowledge acquired through the field trip into the organizational settings in which the students normally work. This activity can be used in a variety of courses and is appropriate for diverse student populations. It can also serve as a flexible unit in nonacademic training sessions. The exercise sharpens students' observational skills, and exposes them to practical applications of communication theory. (HTH)

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"The Nonverbal Communication Field Trip In Organizational Settings"

by

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Abstract

This paper addresses the basic objectives, stages, and curricular uses of the nonverbal communication field trip in organizational settings. This exercise is evaluated in terms of its benefits as an instructional strategy for teaching nonverbal communication.

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"The Nonverbal Communication Field Trip
In Organizational Settings"

Over the past ten years, I have found that one of my most enjoyable and effective learning experiences has been the nonverbal communication field trip in organizational settings. I have used this exercise in a variety of classes with fairly diverse student populations. Below I describe what I hope to accomplish in the field trip, how I administer the exercise, and what teachers and students should expect from it.

Objectives

First of all, I expect students to learn some basic concepts of nonverbal communication. At the least, students should be able to define and describe the following nonverbal areas: proxemics, chronemics, objectics, kinesics, haptics, and vocalics.

A second objective is to observe these nonverbal communication areas in organizational settings. Sources of observation include shopping malls, restaurants, business and industrial organizations, and campus environments.

In addition to becoming aware of nonverbal communication in assigned organizational settings, the field trip experience should provide an opportunity to be able to transfer new knowledge of nonverbal communication to individualized work and living environments. The intent here is, of course, to encourage the student to improve his or her organizational setting by manipulating nonverbal communication dimensions.

Field trip stages

In order to accomplish the above objectives of the field trip, the following four-step procedure is employed.

Stage 1: Mini-lecture on nonverbal communication concepts

I generally spend 30-40 minutes setting up the field trip assignment. First, I assign groups and then designate times and places for each group to begin its on-site observations. Then, I present a lecture on defining and describing each of the six nonverbal communication areas (proxemics, chronemics, objectics,

kinesics, haptics, and vocalics) included in the assignment. This lecture obviously is a mandatory one in a fundamentals or organizational communication course; however, in a nonverbal course I still feel the need to describe nonverbal behaviors and phenomena as they often occur in organizational settings.

Stage 2: On-site observations

Approximately 1-1½ hours is allotted to the groups to conduct their on-site nonverbal observations. If the field trip is conducted at one company, each group begins at a different department. In the campus environment, groups start at different buildings. Typically, several departments or several buildings are assigned to each group, in order to assure a variety of nonverbal observations. In the case of a shopping mall, larger department stores and smaller shops are both included. Groups are encouraged to make some summary statements which reflect their observations of the six nonverbal dimensions being studied.

Stage 3: Processing the nonverbal field trip

If the nonverbal field trip is conducted off-campus, groups generally meet at a restaurant or shopping mall cafeteria to compare observations with other groups and the instructor. I generally have each group present its findings by nonverbal dimension (e.g., proxemics). After covering each of the nonverbal areas, a general discussion of the influence of nonverbal communication factors in the specific office and/or building ensues. For example, after touring one major firm in our geographical area, the negative impact of nonverbal dimensions in the company (e.g., arrangement of desks, territorial barriers, etc.) influenced every student to the extent that not one wished to apply for a position there!

Stage 4: Discussing various applications

The last stage of the nonverbal field trip is to extend new knowledge into a variety of settings. In sections of a graduate level introductory communication course, I have had numerous principals and superintendents who have been in position to make major changes in school buildings. Teachers, upon learning more about nonverbal communication, are now prepared to change classrooms to make them more effective from a "communication" standpoint. A further elaboration of this stage comes from testimonies which students furnish after they have made appropriate suggestions for nonverbal communication changes in their organizational settings.

Curricular uses

There are three predominant uses of the nonverbal field trip: 1) it can be used in a variety of courses; 2) it is appropriate for diverse student populations; and 3) it provides a flexible unit in training sessions.

I have used the field trip in four different courses. In the basic nonverbal course, of course, the field trip can provide extensive examples of communication behaviors in practice. In the organizational communication course the emphasis is on nonverbal variables in business and industrial settings. In the undergraduate and graduate level introductory service courses, the field trip provides a cursory examination of nonverbal communication in settings beyond the classroom. The nonverbal field trip, with the proper orientation, seems to work equally well in all four of the different courses that I have used it.

Secondly, the field trip appears to have an appropriate utility for diverse student populations. Whether students are beginning freshmen or doctoral level graduate students, the field trip has an appeal that transcends academic level and age. The fascination appears to be in the subject matter; nonverbal communication has a naturally interesting appeal in both its everydayness and pervasiveness.

Finally, the nonverbal field trip provides a flexible unit in training sessions. When I have been hired to conduct off-campus nonverbal communication programs, I often include the field trip experience as part of one of the sessions. In school districts, teachers and administrators have toured buildings and classrooms in becoming more aware of, and in some instances in a position to make changes, nonverbal communication (e.g., I have known libraries to change seating arrangements and businesses redesign office space after participating in the nonverbal field trip).

Benefits

Several of the more noticeable benefits of the nonverbal benefits of the nonverbal field trip in organizational settings include the provision of studying communication in the "real world" and sharpening the observational skills of the communication student. The creation of opportunities to apply communication theory in general, and nonverbal communication in particular, has definitely been an asset in assessing communication phenomena in the field. As one student expressed after the field trip, "This experience really opened my eyes to nonverbal communication!" I, too, continually learn to see things in new and meaningful ways as a benefit of

the nonverbal field trip. It has been an instructional strategy that has worked well for me. I hope it works for you.